

Shifting Team Research after COVID-19: *Evolutionary and Revolutionary Change*

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EVOLUTIONARY AND REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IN TEAM RESEARCH

Even before COVID-19 we saw an evolution in team discourse that will continue long after the disease is gone. That said, COVID-19 has been a disruptor that has shifted the trajectory of that evolution, accelerating some trends and introducing others. This is not a story of moving from one state to another, but rather shifting the ongoing arc of change. In this brief we examine the shifts before the pandemic, where COVID-19 has taken us, and implications for future research.

EVOLUTIONARY CHANGE – ACCELERATING AND REDIRECTING EXISTING TRENDS IN TEAM RESEARCH

Richard Hackman's definition of a team has been active for decades: a set of individuals who work interdependently toward a common goal and view themselves as a team (Hackman, 2003). While this definition still holds, underlying it are several unstated assumptions that have been under assault for decades – and on which COVID-19 has had a significant effect:

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Stable Membership to Dynamic Membership

While the traditional model assumed a stable set of members for the life of a team, this is rarely the case anymore (Ancona & Bresman, 2007). Now, membership changes frequently as part-time and part-cycle members come and go and as membership moves to include customers, suppliers, and partners (Gambardella et al., 2017). Moreover, as task needs shift and different forms of expertise are needed and as organizations undergo personnel changes, full-time membership moves accordingly (Bakker, 2010). COVID-19, with its push towards people working remotely reduces the costs of switching membership, making it easier for people to join and shift team membership, and accelerating the need to understand the impact of this fluidity.

Clear Boundaries to Fuzzy Boundaries

While the Hackman model assumed clear team boundaries, we have increasingly seen contexts in which team membership itself is contested (Mortensen, 2014). For example, knowledge work, with members often working remotely across partial commitments to multiple fluidly-shifting teams that frequently span organizational boundaries, often leaves individuals with differing understandings of who is on the team. COVID-19 has exacerbated this trend, particularly as many organizations have shifted to using more contingent and gig workers to manage market shifts and demand uncertainty – making it even more important that we understand the psychological impact of fuzzy boundaries on things like belonging, coordination, learning, and performance.

Internal Focus to Internal and External Focus

While the old model of teams assumes a focus on internal composition and dynamics, the importance of boundary spanning and connecting to the external knowledge, work, and political networks is seen as increasingly important. COVID-19 is one more example of an external event that will require more sensemaking, vicarious learning, adaptability, and collaboration both within and across boundaries (Bresman, 2013; Maloney et al., 2016). Research models will need to shift to include both an internal and external lens, as well as a focus on how to effectively blend external outreach with internal cohesion and coordination.

One Team to Multiple teams

While in traditional organizations, employees were assigned to one team at a time, now most employees are balancing multiple memberships (O'Leary et al., 2011). People stretched across many teams face issues of fragmented attention, task switching, conflicting demands, and work overload. These, in turn affect their individual cognitions, behaviors, and performance as well as both learning and productivity at the team and organizational levels (Mortensen and Gardner, 2017). COVID-19 has pushed this trend further as organizations seek higher resource utilization and resilience through cross-staffing. We, therefore, need to continue to study how people can manage multiple commitments, phases, deadlines, and identity matches to make this mode of operating

better (Rapp and Mathieu, 2019) and to understand the implications of overlapping – and, therefore, non-independent – teams.

Human only and Machines only to Humans and Machines

The trend toward an increased focus on the use of technology in teams started before COVID-19 (e.g., Glikson and Woolley, 2020) as we witnessed AI as a partner in team decision-making and synchronous feedback. However, the pandemic has accelerated our desire to push more work onto machines and provide feedback and coaching remotely. This forces us to examine whether machines add to the process – no groupthink, self-censorship, or ulterior motives for them – or present us with a cold and unwelcome partner, potentially with biases inextricably designed in.

Organization as Context to Ecosystem as Context

While most early team theorists looked at the organization as the context for teams, as organizations move to greater interaction and collaboration with the broader ecosystem, team activity must follow. Research on multi-team systems has examined the impact of teams collaborating – frequently across organizational boundaries – towards a common overarching goal (Zaccaro et al., 2012) while team scholars have studied rotating leadership across teams from different organizations (Davis and Eisenhardt, 2011). COVID-19 has opened up many more opportunities for cross-organizational collaboration calling for a more research on multi-team collaboration and eco-system outreach.

In short, the nice neat world of stable teams with known and set boundaries, an internal focus, and a clear mandate was already on the wane, but with COVID-19 it has almost been obliterated. Now it is time for our models to keep pace and explore the complexities of ever-shifting teams working with new technologies to compete and collaborate across multiple boundaries.

REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE – INTRODUCING NEW QUESTIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR TEAM RESEARCH

While the shifts described above speak of continued evolutionary change, COVID-19 has brought major disruptions too. What are some of the biggest shifts?

Hybridity

Remote working and collaborating through mediating technology, rather than face-to-face, is not new (O’Leary et al., 2002), but until recently, it was the domain of a few who were geographically far or chose a different lifestyle. COVID-19-driven lockdowns instantly transformed a massive portion of the population into remote workers. In an instant we went from wondering if we could or should do this to asking if we can ever go back? This raises the question of how do we structure and manage our teams in a way that drives integration, collaboration, and identification across both those in and out of the office and those on aligned versus mis-aligned schedules? How do we use in-person versus remote time most effectively? How should we design tasks to best take advantage

of hybridity and its inherent dynamism? How do we maintain equity and fairness across differing access to resources? As such hybrid environments appear to be here to stay, we desperately need to examine how best to manage them and to identify best practices.

Decontextualized Socialization and Commitment

For decades, scholars have argued that socialization is critical to establishing strong teams, leading us to push for effective on-boarding that helps newcomers to understand their new environments and socialization to reduce misunderstandings and increase the efficiency of interactions. COVID-19 has effectively separated many of us from colleagues, bosses, and our physical and social environments. While technology helps, many people have lost their felt experience of work. COVID-19 raises the questions: how can we help people to join and understand their work context when they are not physically in it and have no access to casual interactions at the elevator or coffee bar? How do we create and foster team identities, belonging, and safety in the absence of physical and social cues? Is it even possible?

Centrifugal Forces

Work-life balance is a well-established body of research, on which we are not experts. However, COVID-19 has brought the blurring of boundaries between home and work into stark relief. As COVID-19 pushes us into more contact with our families, friends and selves, many people are feeling drawn to activities and meaning outside of work. As these centrifugal forces pull us away from work, they can erode the social glue that holds team members together. How do we manage to create the countervailing centripetal force? Or do we need to? Can we create the containers to provide safety, value, meaning, and identity, when members have shifted their primary focus elsewhere?

THE NEXT CHAPTER – BEYOND TEAMS?

Taken together, these trends may push us to rethink the relationship of teams to the organizations within which they sit – and maybe even those organizations themselves. Consider the example of pharmaceutical giants Novartis and Takeda – fierce competitors before COVID-19 – who now find their two R&D organizations collaborating on new medications to combat the virus, bringing universities, government regulators, labs, and patients into the conversation. Complex, global challenges – of which COVID-19 is a stark example – are increasingly leading us to constitute teams of teams working across organizations, sectors, countries, and specialties not only to do joint work but to rewrite the ground rules of the entire ecosystem. Examples of new organizational forms that essentially constitute dynamically shifting systems of teams increasingly appear in the business press. For practitioners, the promise of this design, often referred to as ‘agile’ or ‘nimble’ (Ancona et al., 2019), is the ability to use distributed, ephemeral, loosely bounded teams in the service of responsiveness and innovation. However, as scholars we may need to consider a new level of analysis, as ‘meta-teams’ – the populations drawn on to dynamically reconstitute such collaborations – may begin to exhibit traits and characteristics of their own. What rules are required to manage such dynamic contexts

with directives from all sides? How do individuals balance competing identities and allegiances and do people start to identify with a meta-team itself? How do relationships between and across such dynamic teams change over time through shifting and shared membership? To date, we have surprisingly little empirical evidence to help us understand the questions this new way of organizing raises.

Even with such fundamental shifts, however, the team will remain the indispensable agent of action and change and, hence, a critical focus for management scholars.

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